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ABSTRACT

One method teachers can use in educating themselves about cultures different from their own is to read literature about the cultural backgrounds of students in their classes. This literature review is designed to provide teachers with descriptions of sources of information about cultural influences on African-American children. It also explains how an awareness of African-American culture, with its unique combination of African and Euro-American traditions, can help classroom teachers develop relationships and structure relevant learning experiences for African-American children of all ages. The review discusses the impact of cultural experiences on the learning style, behavior, social interactions, language, and values of African-American children. The following topics are also covered: (1) the dual socialization of African-Americans; (2) the role of the black family in shaping the personality of children and in helping children survive; (3) African-American children in single-parent families; (4) the role of the extended family and African-American institutional networks in providing emotional and social support; (5) the socialization of African-American males; (6) the social orientation of African-American females; and (7) the role of the African-American church in providing fellowship, adult role models, and material and human resources essential for the well-being of black families. (SM)

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A Selected Review of Literature On

African American American Culture

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Abstract

Cultural understanding of students and their families is necessary if teachers hope to truly educate the children in their classrooms. The African American culture, with its unique combination of African tradition and enforced Euro-American values, provides a challenging area of study for teachers attempting to create a truly multicultural classroom. This paper offers an overview of African American cultural influences on child development and families. Awareness of these influences can assist classroom teachers in developing relationships and structuring relevant learning experiences for African American children of all ages.

A Selected Review of Literature On African American Culture

Introduction

Multiculturalism is currently a trendy topic in education circles. Much has been written on the need to provide children with open, unbiased experiences with other cultures, and to enhance and build upon the inherent strengths of each child's own culture. Educators and lay people alike realize that to ignore the issue of culture in the classroom is to perpetuate the negative cultural messages that historically and currently exist in our society. As Derman-Sparks (1989) states, in neglecting cultural concerns in the classroom,

> ...all children are harmed. On the one hand, struggling against bias that declares a person inferior because of gender, race, ethnicity, or disability sucks energy from and undercuts a child's full development. On the other hand, learning to believe they are superior becasue they are White, or male, or able-bodied, dehumanizes and distorts reality

> for growing children, even while they may be receiving the benefits of institutional privilege (p. ix).

Thus in recent years a flurry of teaching materials has been published, each providing detailed methodology and curriculum on how to create a multicultural environment in the classroom. Many of these materials are truly excellent tools for teachers to use toward this goal. Inherent in each is the too often under-emphasized premise that before implementing a multi-cultural education program, teachers themselves must first attain a basic level of cultural understanding about the children in their classrooms. As Kunjufu (1986) states, "How can you teach a child whom you do not understand?" (p. 12). The answer, of course, is that you can't. Culture shapes the learning style, the behavior, the social interactions, the language and the values of a child. A lack of knowledge about that child's culture leaves teachers with an unknown entity--one that they must somehow reach, educate, and prepare for productive membership in a highly complex society. It is difficult to give a child wings without knowledge

of his roots.

One method of cultural education for teachers is community involvement. Berger (1991) encourages teachers to become actively involved in events in the community in which they teach. Such involvement will provide teachers with direct experiences with cultural values and customs. Another strategy is for teachers to utilize parents as sources of first-hand information, inviting them into the classroom to share of themselves and of their culture, and visiting parents and children in their homes to actually witness the interaction of family and culture. Both of these avenues offer exciting and meaningful experiences in multicultural teacher education. A third, though possibly less direct, method of cultural education is for teachers to simply take advantage of the vast amount of literature currently being published on various cultures. Reviewing this literature and placing it within a relevant framework may help teachers to acquire valuable information on the cultural backgrounds of each child in their classes. Cultural influences on child development, language,

social interactions, and behavior can then be utilized to make the education process more productive and less frustrating for teachers, parents, and, most importantly, for children.

It is toward this end that this paper is intended. It is not an exhaustive review of the literature--such an endeavor would probably require several years of dedicated work by more than one researcher. Merely it is an overview of several sources available to the writer. Its focus is not to describe African American culture in its totality, but merely to identify a few of the cultural influences on African American children, their development, and their families. This paper is a beginning effort, initiated by a teacher who is not culturally insensitive, but merely somewhat culturally ignorant. Nevertheless, the desire to know and to be a receptive vehicle for education is present and will hopefully be visible throughout.

Overview

African American culture is a fluid and dynamic interaction of many unique elements. Language, religion, family, values, and history all work together

to create a distinct ethnic experience within the dominant Euro-American culture. This culture-within-a-culture status has necessitated a dual socialization process for some African Americans. Peters (1981) states that African American "socialization occurs within the ambiguities of a cultural heritage that is both Afro-American and Euro-American and a social system that espouses both democratic equality for all citizens and caste-like status for its Black citizens" (p. 211). Kunjufu (1986) contends that because of this dual socialization process many African Americans may feel as if they really do not have a culture. This belief rests upon the assumption that enforced contact with and submission to the Euro-American culture has diluted many cultural elements that the first African Americans brought with them from their homelands. Staples (1988a) states that "in the transition from Africa to the American continent, there can be no doubt that African culture was not retained in any pure form" (p.307). Pure is the key word in Staples' comments, however, since sociologists are able to trace many contemporary elements of African American culture back

to their African roots.

> Africanisms abound in Black culture in the United States. For example, Black dialect, including South Carolina Gullah, has been identified as originating from aspects of African language retained by enslaved Africans. Other examples are Black folklore, aspects of Black childrearing, Black music, and Black religious expressions (Hale-Benson, 1982, p. 183).

Obviously the, African American culture has been transmitted in one form or another through the generations. Historically, African Americans have lived, worked, studied, and socialized together because of the legal and social segregations imposed upon them by society. Much of this segregation still exists, although hopefully its incidence is declining. Hale-Benson (1982) suggests that in spite of efforts toward desegregation many African American communities continue to be closely united because they "enjoy being together and they feel more comfortable when they can experience the beauty and the joy of Blackness" (p.

19). Given this importance of ethnic identity it is logical to assume that important cultural elements have been transmitted from one generation to the next with the goal of maintaining and extending ethnic pride and identity in the younger generations. Kunjufu (1986) states that these basic cultural elements include language, music, food, dress, religion, appearance, and learning style.

African American Families

Cultural influences on child development can not be separated from the study of the structure, dynamics, and interactions of the family as a cultural unit. The study of African American families has too often been distorted by the lack of understanding and personal biases of researchers in the field. According to Allen (1978) the first studies of African American families began shortly after the publication of Charles Darwin's Origin of Species in 1859. "It was the search for 'primitive' families which first drew attention to black families (in the form of Australian Aborigine and African families) as objects for scientific inquiry" (p. 167-168). Allen (1978) further states that

subsequent researchers have generally taken one of three competing ideological perspectives when working with the topic of African American families. The first perspective, that of cultural equivalence, holds that Black families do not constitute a distinct cultural form in contrast to white families. The second perspective, that of cultural deviance, acknowledges the uniqueness of Black families and attributes the differences between Black and white families to deficits within the Black families. Cultural variation, the third perspective, acknowledges the differences between Black and white families and attributes these differences to the unique situational constraints under which the families operate. Any review of literature in this area must first begin by ascertaining the author's perspective and filtering the information received to a usable status--a challenging task for a lay person in the field.

Staples (1988b) states that although the Black family unit has always been a vitally important force in shaping the personality of its children and in carrying out survival functions, it is basically an

adaptive unit that changes and modifies its form and dynamics according to the needs imposed upon its members by a predominantly hostile society. During periods of intense turmoil or oppression, the Black family unit has been "a strong and resilient institution" (p. 20). This statement is considerably at odds with the prevailing belief that under slavery white slave-owners did not encourage or even permit close family ties or bonding. Nonetheless, Staples (1988a) states that the family unit "was one of the most important survival mechanisms for people held in bondage" (p. 305).

According to Staples (1988b) the African American family as an institution has been influenced by many negative forces. Slavery, industrialization, the advent of technology, and changes in religious institutions have all taken their toll on family form and dynamics. Hillard (1984), however, believes that these experiences provide Black families with a common memory and common values that enhance cooperation within the family unit and thus strengthen family ties.

Gary and Gary (1986) discuss seven traits

considered to be important to the characterization of strong African American families. The first of these, a strong economic base, provides security in good times and in bad, and guarantees that the basic needs of all family members can be met. This trait is personified by a strong work orientation in the family, a tendency toward stable employment and the importance of property ownership. The second trait focuses on the importance of religion in the family life. Since religion is also a vital element in the African American community at large, more will be said about it in later sections of this paper. The third trait involves achievement orientation and is manifested in the educational aspirations, expectations, and attainments of African American family members. The adaptability of family roles is also common in strong African American families, with various members sharing family responsibilities and filling in for each other when the need arises. In strong African American families members share intense bonds of kinship, involving a high degree of commitment to the family and a sense of mutual obligation. The sixth trait, coping

capabilities, provides family members with the ability to deal with crises in a positive manner and to maintain support networks for each other during times of need. The final trait is an emotional ability to affirm one another and to respect and appreciate each family member. As in any culture, these traits are not present in all families. They do, however, seem to be present in varying degrees in many strong African American families whose members are successful within the community and within society at large.

Children in the African American Family

Allen (1978) asserts that "black families constitute distinct cultural forms in contrast to white families" (p. 169). Glick (1981) states that one of the distinguishing features of African American families is that they are more likely to include young children than are families of other races. According to Glick, however, there are some indications that the average number of children born to African American and Euro-American mothers "may currently be in a phase of convergence" (p. 111).

Regardless of the number of children in the

family, children are extremely important in most African American families. Childrearing, already a challenge in contemporary society, may be doubly difficult for Black parents because of the conflicting demands from the African American and Euro-American cultures. "Black child-rearing must resolve a basic conflict that exists between the European world view and the African world view" (Hale-Benson, 1982, p. 61). Nobles (1974) suggests that the traditional African world view encourages cooperation and group dependence. African values emphasize the individual's responsibility to forward the tribal goals of group survival and unity with nature. The Euro-American worldview, on the other hand, stresses rugged individualism and independence, and encourages children to compete against each other. These characteristics contribute to individual success and environmental control in the American mainstream, but may be a source of considerable conflict to children and parents accustomed to traditional African values.

According to Hale-Benson (1982), in many cases Black parents are forced to ignore many tenets of Euro-

American childrearing simply to ensure the survival of their children.

> White teachers never cease to be amazed as they teach children not to fight (but to tell the teacher if someone hits them) when a Black child reports that his parents have told him to hit anybody back who hits him. The white teacher has no conception of the kind of reality a Black child has to face. Perhaps no one is around for him to tell, and a child must be able to defend himself from attack (p. 62).

Hale-Benson (1982) further asserts that continuous comparison of African American and white children has influenced childrearing attitudes in African American families. This comparison has challenged Black parents to build their children's self-esteem and to soothe their anxieties "when they engage in competition or social comparison with white children" (p. 64). Hale-Benson (1982) suggests that such comparisons have also led African American parents to make stricter demands for good public behavior and performance from their

children "because falling short would reflect unfavorably upon the group" (p. 49).

African American Children in Single-Parent Families

A focus for much recent media and research attention on African American families has been the number of children born into families headed by single females. Although Hall and King (1982) emphasize "that the dominant black family structure is the two-parent household" (p. 539), research reveals that large numbers of African American children are being raised by their mothers alone. Kunjufu (1985) states that "62 percent of all African American children live with a single parent" (p. 11). Staples (1988b) corroborates this information with his assertion that "the statistical data reveal that the majority of Black Children are born out-of-wedlock, many of them to teenage mothers" (p. 23). The reasons behind this phenomenon are complex and cannot possibly be summarized by one global theory that refuses to take into consideration the circumstances of individuals. A beginning of understanding, however, may be glimpsed by looking at theories that attempt to explain the

pervasive attitudes of males and females toward having children. Hale-Benson (1982) says that many African American women consider childbearing to be a "validation of their femaleness" (p. 67) and thus have a very positive attitude toward having children. Hale-Benson suggests that "this validation may provide an explanation for the disproportionate number of births by girls in their early teens" (p. 67). Brown (1976) states that one criteria of manhood for many African American male youth includes "how many girls you can impregnate and not get married" (p. 6). It is important to recognize, however, that these theories may be stereotypical. Socioeconomic and educational status, as well as many environmental factors, impact young people of all cultures and may have significant influence on the number of teenage pregnancies in each.

Further understanding of the reasons for the number of African American children growing up in single-parent homes is reached upon consideration of Hillard's (1984) statement that "Black people (do) not give their children up for adoption if they were born out of wedlock" (p. 7-8) as is common in many other

cultures. Either new family units are created or the children are incorporated into existing family units, thus becoming part of the statistical pool.

Hill (1988) states that "the average age of unwed (African American) fathers at the birth of their first child (is) 17 years" (p. 3). Although this may be a young age for sexual activity and the resulting status of fatherhood, Hill's (1988) research findings "suggest that the initial bonds between young fathers and adolescent mothers are strong and not casual" (p. 5) but that they may weaken over time. Kunjufu (1985) expresses concern that these weakening bonds leave too many African American children without fathers. Although both boys and girls may feel the lack of a male parent in their lives, boys in particular may suffer if there is no positive adult male after whom they may pattern their own lives and relationships.

> Very few African American women are consciously aware that their son needs a positive male role model, that the family, streets, television, school and church institutions come up lacking, and that a

> concerted effort between them and a male extended family member must actively fill the void (Kunjufu, 1985, p. 27).

Kunjufu is quick to point out, however, that only "a very few families receive no input from a male figure, i.e., grandfather, father, brother, uncle, nephew, cousin, neighbor, lover, or friend" (p. 27).

Statistics about African American female-headed families are surprising, given the common beliefs about the prevalence of out-of-wedlock births in the African American community. According to Jackson and Watson (1989) in 1988 approximately half of all African American families were headed by females. Of these households only 11.2% were headed by single women who had never been married.

Family Support Networks

Regardless of previous marital status, McAdoo (1988) states that "single mothers have been forced to draw extensively upon the African American institutional support networks provided historically by Black churches, social and fraternal organizations, and the formation of fictive family arrangements" (p. 19).

These networks provide families with emotional and social support, and may also be a source of financial assistance when needed. Jackson and Watson (1989) report that in 1987 "African American female-headed households averaged (an annual income of) $9,710, or barely 57% of the income of white female-headed households" (p. 3). Clearly then, financial assistance is an issue for many African American women who are the heads of their households. Hall and King (1982) state that although government dependence for financial assistance may provide a certain amount of economic security, it ultimately reduces the family's status and isolates it from the mainstream.

> Many families are reduced to a society of 'waiters.' They must wait in the clinic for medical care, on buses for transportation, in food stamp lines for meals, on the arrival of the postman for income. In other words, they have little control over their lives and must wait for their very sustenance" (p. 539).

Fearing the loss of this control has led many families to look within the African American community for

assistance, drawing particularly upon the resources of extended family and kin networks.

Staples (1988) states that "in African societies kinship was and is the basis of their social organization" (p. 24). Ellison (1990) contends that kinship is a key factor in African American socialization as well. Ellison states that extended families make up the core of many Black social networks and that "nonkin ties may be less reliable and less durable than kinship bonds" (p. 298). Hall and King (1982) explain that the close relationships within the extended family provide economic and moral support for daily life, as well as additional help during times of crisis. "Families serve each other as loan agencies, child care facilities, emergency bread baskets, nursing homes, transportation agents, models, and morale boosters" (p. 541).

Day care, an issue of concern for all families with young children, may be especially troublesome for African American female heads of households "because of the geographic inaccessibility of many (child care) centers and/or because of the mother's inability to pay

the fees, especially if there are two or more children" (Hall and King, 1982, p. 541). Many African American mothers are forced to rely on kinship networks for the child care that allows them to work and bring in family income. Beyond just providing informal daycare, however, Staples (1988b) suggests that the extended family offers young children a liberation from the confines of the nuclear family unit. Children are able to receive emotional nurturance and support from caring adults other than or in addition to their own mothers and fathers. "It also helps to socialize children more effectively into the values that Blacks held more strongly in rural and southern settings" (p. 24).

Accepting assistance from family members does not bring with it the same stigma that might accompany assistance taken from government or social institutions. Ellison (1990) reports that "members of Black extended families participate in broad support networks, often exchanging financial aid and an array of services (e.g., housing, household tasks)" (p. 299). Unspoken in the offer and acceptance of assistance is the understanding that those offers will be

reciprocated in the future, whenever the need arises. Hall and King (1982) assert that African American families expect to be called upon and to call upon others in the family to teach, to counsel, to encourage, and to provide financial assistance. "Family members who are homeless or unable to care for themselves because of age, illness, unemployment, and so forth, expect to be taken into the household of a relative on a temporary basis" (p. 540).

Staples (1988b) contends that a decline of the extended family system is one of the major problems facing African American families today. This decline is the result of the increasing urbanization of African American families as they relocate away from kinsmen. Hall and King (1982) assert that many family members may still continue to receive significant aid from relatives even after moving away. Hall and King (1982) call this phenomenon the "subextended family" (p. 540). Chapman (1991) explains the importance of maintaining family relationships, even those that become long distance, when she discusses the importance of family reunions. Chapman states that family reunions are a

"long-standing custom among Southern African Americans" (p. 8) and are an important conduit for transmitting cultural information and for relating family history.

Staples (1988b) also asserts that the importance of the extended family is waning because of changes in the attitudes of Black youth toward older members of the family. Many youth have adopted an anti-authority attitude that makes them considerably less responsive to the authority, guidance, and knowledge of their grandparents, parents, and other older family members.

African American Males

A lack of respect for authority seems to be a stereotypical characteristic bestowed upon many African Americans, particularly young males. Hill (1988) expresses concern about the consistent media portrayal of African American men as "street hustlers, drug pushers, pimps, delinquents, violent gang members, incarcerated felons, ex-convicts, and irresponsible husbands and fathers" (p. 7). Hill (1988) states that these types of portrayals have made it extremely difficult for young African American men to develop a positive conception of male roles within the family and

within the society, and have had a very negative effect on their self-concepts.

Kunjufu (1985) asserts that many African American boys, unfortunately, draw their examples of manhood from the dominant Euro-American culture. They "are taught to be aggressive, not to cry, show little emotion and affection toward male children, ignore health symptoms, and continue to bring home the "bacon" (p. 23). Hill (1988) states that a common tendency of African American mothers is to insulate their male children from the devastating effects of racism by coddling them or making them overly dependent. In contrast, Hale-Benson (1982) states that African American boys are most often given the responsibility of filling their own economic needs and desires at an early age. "Most boys by the age of eight have newspaper routes, grass to cut or some other part time job" (p. 65) to earn their own spending money or to make a contribution to the family income.

Socialization of African American males occurs both in familial and social contexts. It is a complicated process influenced by many environmental

and interactional factors. Several elements in the socialization process of males may be unique to the African American culture and bear special discussion.

The first of these is an activity called "playing the dozens." Kunjufu (1986) describes the dozens as an activity in which two male opponents duel verbally, making derogatory comments about each other and about each other's families, especially their mothers. A peer audience watches the performance, urging the opponents on, and passing judgement as to whom the ultimate victor is. The dozens is considered to be a rite of manhood for young African American males because it involves the mastery of several skills. First, and most importantly, each boy must strive to maintain control of his emotions and his temper under the onslaught of insults to him and to his mother, to whom he may be very close. Second, while maintaining this emotional control, each boy must be able to "counter with an even more clever slur upon his opponent's mother" (p. 16-17). Kunjufu (1985) contends that this rigid emotional control is a trait that is emphasized in many aspects of the socialization of

African American males. Although "playing the dozens" is an activity primarily associated with young African American males, it may also be found in social groups of other ethnicities, ages and genders.

Hale-Benson (1982) describes two other elements in the socialization process. The first of these is the special walk that many African American boys master. Rhythm in movement is an expression of strength or weakness within the African American culture. Using older boys and men in the community for models, African American boys may create and perfect a distinctive way of walking and moving their bodies. Hale-Benson (1982) states that this distinctive walk, usually mastered by age 8, is often called "the pimp" or the "ditty bop" (p. 65).

The second element of male socialization discussed by Hale-Benson (1982) is perhaps familiar to males of many cultures. In the African American culture athletic prowess is taught by the peer group with supplementary help from fathers or other important male role models. Hale-Benson (1982) asserts that "competitive sports are very important in Afro-American

culture" (p. 65). Competency in sports helps to assure a boy's status within his peer group and is an important rite of manhood.

Kunjufu (1990) expresses concern over the relatively small number of young black males in college, saying that African American females outnumber African American males by over 210,000. Jackson and Watson (1980) concur, stating that although high school drop-out rates for both African American males and African American females are about 16% in the 14 to 34 year-old age group, African American females are much better represented in institutions of higher education.

African American Females

Jackson and Watson (1989) contend that although highly educated African American women may earn even higher salaries than their white counterparts, the majority of the female African American population makes up the most impoverished racial gender group in the United States. While this statement provides an alarming description of the vast numbers of African American women living in poverty, it is not an accurate reflection of attitudes within the African American

culture toward women working outside their families and homes. O'Hare (1991) asserts that "working women were commonplace in the African American community long before a majority of white women entered the labor force" (p. 23). Hall and King (1982) agree when they state that even the feminist movements have not made major changes in (the) attitudes of African American women toward marriage, divorce and work. "Historically, the black female has been oriented to work and family" (p. 539).

Hale-Benson (1982) contends that African American women have a very strong orientation toward motherhood. She suggests that this orientation may be the result of the responsibilities for siblings and housework many African American girls assume at an early age. Unlike their male counterparts, young African American girls are generally not expected to earn income outside the home. "When girls have jobs, it is usually during adolescence, and they babysit or perform other domestic duties" (p. 66).

According to Hale-Benson (1982), facial beauty, a trait emphasized for females from birth on in the Euro-

American culture, is generally de-emphasized among girls and women in the African American culture. This is at least partly because society's standards for facial beauty are largely based on Euro-American standards. Instead, style and personal uniqueness are emphasized for African American females, with particular attention given to "clothing and the rhythm with which she walks and dances" (p. 67).

The Role of the African American Church

African American women also play a vital role in the lives of the community churches. According to Hale-Benson (1982), African American women participate in the largest numbers in church services and activities. Participation in the church may provide single women with fellowship and adult role models similar to those in an extended family, as well as material and human resources essential for the family's well-being. Kunjufu (1986) asserts that many African American males grow up believing that church is primarily for women and attend only because their mothers require it. Contrary to this belief, however, Billingsley and Caldwell (1991) contend that "the Black

church continues to hold the allegiance of large numbers of African Americans and exerts great influence over their behavior" (p. 428). For those who take advantage of its offerings, states Hale-Benson (1982), the African American church is the center of social life.

Community outreach is also becoming a major concern of African American churches. Although historically the spiritual anchor for African Americans, the Black church is now "intensifying its role as a major resource for dealing with the social and economic problems of the black poor" (Carnegie, 1988, p.2). Research findings by Billingsley and Caldwell (1991) corroborate this statement. Billingsley and Caldwell interviewed church leaders (primarily senior pastors) to discover their "personal orientation toward the mission of the church" (p. 435). Findings revealed that fully 72% of these church leaders felt that both the religious needs of individual church members and the concerns of the larger community were important. Outreach programs in many African American churches may include activities

for members and nonmembers in child development, youth service and development, education, family support and aid, individual adult programs, elderly service and aid, and community service and development. The largest number of community outreach programs are targeted toward children and youth (Billingsley and Caldwell, 1991). In this manner the African American church is redefining its traditional role in maintaining the independence and self-sufficiency of the Black community.

Conclusion

In summary African American culture may be seen as a combination of traditional African values and the surrounding, sometimes dominating, Euro-American attitudes and beliefs. Although many African Americans feel torn by the conflicts between the African belief of group unity and the Euro-American tendency toward individual competition, extended family networks and religious institutions enable individuals to maintain their ethnic identities and function comfortably in the larger society. These two institutions also offer significant support and assistance for those within the

community, such as members of female-headed households, who have unique needs or who lack the necessary resources.

As a culture, African Americans represent a vital and dynamic force in American society. Classroom teachers who learn to value and take advantage of the assets of this culture will not only enhance the learning experiences and potential of the African American children in their classrooms, but will also make a significant contribution to the multicultural movement currently taking place in all facets of education.

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